20/20 Vision: Stuck in the Dark

February 9, 2020

Bendersville & Wenksville United Methodist Churches

**Matthew 27:11-26**



So, up until now we have been delving into some big stories, exploring some of the big names of the faith. We started with the story of the Wise Men who followed a star and and brought Jesus gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh before they thrwarted King Herod’s plans after being warned by God in a dream not to go back and report to him. The Wise Men aren’t exactly the Abrahams and Noahs or the Apostles of our faith, but they do appear in just about every Nativity Scene on the planet, and they are pretty much universally-recognized characters in the story.

We talked about Jacob, the deceiver – Abraham’s grandson who was met by God in a dream when he was on the run after stealing his brother’s birthright.

We spent two weeks talking about Joseph and Pharaoh, a story which makes up fully a THIRD of the book of Genesis. A huge story which is hugely important for explaining how the Israelites got to Egypt in the first place, which then sets up the story for the Exodus and everything that follows.

We talked about Daniel, and King Nebuchadnezzar’s dream, and saw this giant of the faith rising in power because of his ability to both serve God deeply and at the same time live fully into the life that he was planted into in exile.

Today, our dreamer is vastly different than any of the ones we have seen up until this point. Until now, we have been looking at giants of the faith who have profound and monumental and life-and-history-altering dreams that are critical to the story.

But today, our dreamer is not well-known at all.



In fact, I’m not sure I ever really ever noticed her existence at all until I started reading up on Biblical dreams. She is only ever mentioned once in all of scripture (or possibly, twice, and we will get to that shortly). All four of the gospel writers take great care to detail the events of Jesus’ trial before Pilate, but Matthew is the only gospel writer who talks at all about this little detail of the story. Our dreamer doesn’t even get a name, and she only barely gets a passing mention. We don’t know a thing about her, except that she is Pilate’s wife.

It’s interesting, though, that as little as we know about her, certain branches of the church – including the Greek Orthodox Church and the Coptic Church – have actually sainted her. Which is fascinating to me, because she is really not all that much more than a footnote in a much bigger story.

So because this woman is so mysterious, and we know so little about her, there have been a lot of folks through the centuries who have taken to trying to discover as much about her as possible.

What we think we know about her is not actually from scripture at all. So take it with a grain of salt.



But there is a book called the Gospel of Nicodemus that was probably written sometime around the middle of the fourth century by an unknown author or probably more than one author. Part of this work includes a section about Pilate that many scholars agree was most likely written much earlier than the rest of the book, and that contains what is said to have been an official record of Jesus’ trial. And in this section we see the story of Pilate’s wife sending him news of her dream and begging him to lay off of Jesus – basically the same story that we see in our scripture reading today – but here, we get her name: Claudia Procula.

It is thought that Claudia was probably a proselyte – basically, a God-fearing man or woman from outside the Jewish faith who has converted to Judaism. It would have common during that time in history for the wives of prominent government officials to have made some kind of religious conversion, and then to use their religious beliefs to attempt to influence their powerful husbands – with varying degrees of success.

So assuming that these old documents are, indeed, accurate at least on this point, and assuming that Pilate’s wife is, in fact, Claudia Procula, then it is ***very*** likely that this is the very same Claudia that we see the Apostle Paul writing about at the end of 2 Timothy. Again, we only get just the shortest, tiniest little passing reference to her even there, but if this person is indeed one and the same, then our story today just got a whole lot bigger.

So here’s what’s going on.



We are at the end of Matthew’s gospel. Jesus has been arrested and brought before Caiaphas the High Priest on charges of blasphemy. It’s important to note that these are *religious* charges – not political ones; and certainly not criminal ones. In the Roman empire, the court system didn’t care one way or another what someone’s religious beliefs were, or if they even had any beliefs – as long as they kept paying their taxes to Caesar and didn’t kill anybody, they were good.

And furthermore, the Jewish communities generally hated the Roman empire. The fact that they were beholden to any government or outside ruler other than their own really rubbed the people of Israel the wrong way. That was why, just a week earlier, these very same religious leaders and crowds of people had thrown a party with palm branches for Jesus – they had thought that Jesus would be the messiah who would step up and overthrow Rome.

So when Caiaphas the High Priest finds Jesus guilty of blasphemy, it is really interesting that he and his cronies would then hand Jesus over to the Roman court system for prosecution. A court system where a crime of “blasphemy” wasn’t even a thing.



So Jesus gets handed off to the governor, a man named Pontus Pilate. And evidently, Pilate thinks these charges are ridiculous and should be handled by the Temple authorities – not the court authorities. But, evidently, a riot is forming outside, that Pilate really doesn’t want to have to deal with, and so he thinks, “okay, maybe I’ll play their game here for a little while. Make them think that I care what is going on, give them a few hours to cool down. Then they will certainly see reason and let Jesus go all on their own.”

So Pilate goes through the motions. He questions Jesus. He gives him a trial. And then he identifies one other prisoner – a man named Jesus Barabbas, or Barabbas for short, who is a notorious criminal – probably a Jewish man who had led an insurrection against the Roman government and in the process another man had gotten killed. So Barabbas was going down for murder.

And Pilate thinks, surely, if I give the crowds the choice between freeing Jesus, who has done absolutely nothing wrong, and a murderer, they will decide on their own to let Jesus go.

But that’s not the way it went, at all. The crowds by this time were out for blood. And the crowds were getting bigger. The people in the crowd were no longer just the High Priest and the religious leaders and the onlookers from the Temple – they probably weren’t even all Jewish folk, either. There is something about an angry crowd that draws people in, and even folk who didn’t know Jesus or didn’t care one way or another about what happened or what he had done or not done – even casual bystanders were getting swept up in the crowd and wound up shouting and hollering and making noise along with the rest of them.

So while all this is going down, Pilate’s wife has a dream. We don’t know *what* she dreamed, exactly – only that the dream rattled her. In her words, “I have suffered a great deal because of a dream about Jesus.” She doesn’t tell us what she dreamed, but she does know that Jesus is innocent. “Have nothing to do with that innocent man,” she tells him. “Don’t take this case. Don’t humor these religious leaders with a trial. They are manipulating you and making you an actor in their own drama, and this Jesus – not only is he innocent, but there’s more to him than meets the eye. He is powerful in ways that you can’t even imagine – and his power extends far beyond the grave. And you don’t want to mess with that. So let him go. Don’t have anything to do with him or with this mess that the High Priest just dumped in your lap. It’s not going to end well for you.”

So Pilate listens to his wife…sort-of. He’s between a rock and a hard place. On one hand, he has his wife saying one thing. Let him go. He’s thrown a bone to the crowds, saying “it’s customary to release one prisoner, so of course, you want Jesus released to you instead of this murderer Barabbas,” but the crowds are having none of that. “Release Barabbas!” they shout, not knowing or caring one iota about who Barabbas is or what he has done.

And so with the crowds out for blood and not listening to reason or common sense, and getting more and more riled up, and getting bigger and louder and more scary and more bloodthirsty with each passing moment, and with his wife in his ear saying “don’t do it. I’m telling you. You are going to regret it. Do. Not. Do. It,” Pilate finds a way to appease the angry mob, while at the same time following his wife’s plea to the letter.

“Have nothing to do with that innocent man.” She never said, “free him.” She never said, “let him go.” All she said was “don’t get involved.”



So Pilate washed his hands. He says to the crowds, “This man is innocent. He has done nothing wrong. His blood be on your hands. I take no responsibility for what is about to happen. Let the records show that I have no part in this.”

Then he took part in it. He released Barabbas to them. He had Jesus flogged. And he sent Jesus to be crucified.

We know what happens next in Jesus’ story. A deep darkness falls that night and then three days later the glory of God shines more brilliantly than ever before as Jesus conquers death and rises again. That’s the story that matters, and the story that we live by.

But what about the rest of Pilate’s story? What happened next for him? And what about his wife?

Well, nobody knows exactly. And here’s where we come back to the supposed court records from that fourth-century writing, where his wife’s name is revealed. And that passing verse at the end of 2 Timothy. Assuming that these documents are what many scholars believe they are, and assuming this Claudia is one and the same person, then this story just got a lot more interesting.



Because it would seem that even though Pilate had said, “I’m done. I’m out. Deal with this yourselves. Not my problem,” his wife Claudia had her own thoughts. And this dream that she had dreamt didn’t just end when she woke up. And the message of her dream still stood, even after Jesus was handed over to be crucified.

This dream may have marked the end of Pilate’s involvement in the story, but it was just the beginning for Claudia. For after Christ’s death and resurrection, Claudia’s life and her story were raised to new life too. Not only would she have been a Proselyte – a non-Jewish convert to Judaism – but she soon became one of the earliest converts to Christianity; an early believer – an early servant of the risen Lord; a fellow laborer along with Paul and Timothy. She likely stayed in Rome following her conversion and worked together with other early Christian believers in the church at Rome, in some ways helping to bridge the gap between Jewish Christians and Gentile Christians that existed in Rome during that time. And she and several other folks would have visited Paul when he was in prison in Rome, leading to Paul’s sending Timothy greetings from Claudia and her friends.

Again, a lot of this is just speculation. But I like to believe that, even though she only gets one little verse in the story, the work that God is doing within Pilate’s wife, whoever she is, is powerful. And the fact that she had a dream that shook her up enough to interrupt her husband’s trying a case – something that I would assume was not common practice – that God was unearthing something in her. Planting the seeds for a powerful life of faith that would develop and grow over the course of time. And that even though references to her are few and far between in scripture, that God nevertheless used her behind the scenes to make a powerful impact on the growing young church in Rome.

Friends, sometimes it feels like here in our little pocket in Adams County, tucked out of the way of the big population centers, that we don’t really have much of an impact on the life of the world around us. We look at the world and its needs – the yelling and the riots and the crowds and the places of deep need and deep hurt, and in a lot of cases deep injustice, and it’s tempting to think, who am I? I’m just little me sitting here, and nothing that I do or say is going to change anything. I’m just a footnote in history, if that.



But if Pilate’s wife teaches us anything, it is that we don’t have to have a name or notoriety or power or influence for God to be doing something within us. In the end, what she said to her husband, that did not change the outcome of the story. Jesus was going to be crucified either way, and Pilate was going to have something to do with that, whether he admitted it or not. God didn’t use her to change history. But that doesn’t mean that God didn’t use her. God’s plans for her had less to do with the world stage and more to do with her cultivating a life of faith that could then impact the people right next to her, in her community, in her church, in her little circle. And without these people paying attention to the ways that God is speaking to them and responding to the call of God upon their lives, there would not have been an early church, and there would not be a church today.

*[Wrap it up]*